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SUBJECT: GEORGIAN OFFICIALS HOPE FOR CONTINUED FRIENDSHIP
AFTER ELECTIONS IN UKRAINE

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Georgian government responses to the apparent election of Victor Yanukovych in Ukraine has been generally positive, with all following President Saakashvili's lead in congratulating the Ukrainian people for their well-run election. Additionally, officials from Saakashvili to the MFA have noted their belief (and hope) that relations would not be impacted negatively by the victory of a candidate commonly viewed from Georgia as a friend of Moscow. Despite the upbeat comments, Georgian private opinion has been more mixed, with concerns expressed about the loss of a strong ally in the region. End Summary.

MISHA OFFERS CONGRATULATION AND COMPARES PROGRESS

¶2. (SBU) Senior Georgian officials including President Saakashvili struck a positive tone in public responses to election results out of Kyiv. Stressing the importance he places on remaining Ukraine's "friend," Saakashvili complimented Kyiv on the election results and process and stated that, regardless of who won, Georgia would remain Ukraine's partner. He went on to note that Georgian officials have good contacts with both the Tymoshenko and Yanukovych camps, and he expressed hope Georgia would retain its good relations with the new Ukrainian president. Citing Georgia's interest in a strong and economically successful Ukraine, Saakashvili noted that the absence of a unity government had constrained Ukraine's economic development. While generally positive in his comments to the press, Saakashvili also made a point to differentiate Georgia and Ukraine, citing statistics showing how far ahead Georgia was in eliminating government corruption and simplifying the tax system. Additionally, he stressed that Georgia was no longer a "post-Soviet country" and was among the "most developed" states.

¶3. (SBU) After expressing his personal satisfaction with the process, and saying the rest of Europe would envy the manner in which the election was conducted, Saakashvili also discussed publicly the issue of Georgian election observers. Saakashvili confirmed that Georgia did not send election observers for the second round due to "misunderstandings" that took place in the initial voting, in reference to claims of interference by Tymoshenko opponents, who held up transcripts of phone conversations about the issue which took place between Tymoshenko and Saakashvili.

PARLIAMENT, MFA JOIN THE CHORUS

¶4. (SBU) In remarks on Georgia television, Parliamentary Speaker Davit Bakradze expressed his hopes and "deep confidence" that friendly relations would continue between Georgia and Ukraine. Bakradze said that strategic partnership would continue based on their traditional friendship and good neighborliness which has always existed between the two peoples. On February 8, Ukrainian Ambassador to Georgia Vasili Tsibenko met with Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Davit Jalagania to pass the results of the second round, as well as discuss areas for future progress in the bilateral relationship. In public remarks, Deputy Foreign

Minister Nino Kalandadze noted that despite reports of Yanukovych's victory, she saw no "cracks" in the strategic partnership and that despite skeptical attitudes about danger in the future of the relationship, she was convinced that relations would continue to be excellent regardless of the president.

CHATTERING CLASS LESS OPTIMISTIC

15. (SBU) Independent Georgian experts took on a less optimistic tone in their comments following the presidential elections, with some making the obvious point that it would be highly unlikely for Saakashvili to have as good a relationship with either Ukrainian candidate as he has with President Yuschenko, who is godfather to his youngest son. Giorgi Khutsishvili from Tbilisi's International Center on Conflict Resolution noted that both Tymoshenko and Yanukovych have expressed interest in better relations with Moscow, which is a sign of a changed political environment in the area that Tbilisi can not ignore; Georgia would have to modify its tough line towards Russia or risk increasing its vulnerability. Former Georgian Ambassador to Russia Zurab Abashidze noted that while Yanukovych was certainly the preferred candidate of Moscow, he would likely still pursue good relations with both Russia and the West. Georgian Institute for Public Affairs analyst Tornike Sharashenidze took on a more positive tone, stating that a more pro-Russian Ukraine will cause U.S. and European influence to be much more focused on the Caucasus and Georgia than before.

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